VIB RIBBON – Q&A

Interview with Masaya Matsuura (NanaOn-Sha)

Q. You set up your own company, NanOn-Sha. What does "NanaOn-Sha" mean?

A. "Nana" means 7th, "On" means sound, and "Sha" means company in Japanese. When put together, it's called "NanaOn-sha". There is no significant meaning to "NanaOn-Sha" but it sounded good when all these 3 words are put together, and I thought anyone in the world will be able to pronounce this name in a similar way.

Q. Where does vibri come from?

A. If we were to say that the world of digital data has dimension just like that of ours, vibri would be a character who accidentally popped out from the digital world and into ours.

All digital data, whether it be an image, sound, or program, is similar in that they take the form of data in 0s and 1s. We human beings can decode data by using programs to show them as sound or images, but vibri on the other hand, decodes and recognizes the data in different ways. Therefore, particular changes or transformation in the music would, for example, translate into obstacles for vibri while taking a walk. This would be the sort of underlying concept for vibri.

Q. Is there a story behind the design of the game?

A. Originally, the game was going to be completely different in style and gameplay. The only feature that didn't change was playing with your own CDs. We were thinking of creating more colorful/vivid worlds and characters in the beginning, however, it started to bother me to see that the game sets off a specific world of music to the players. In fact, this made me stop working on the project entirely, after a year and a half into developing the game. It took a lot of my courage to simply abandon the game, but was the very important decision at the same time. I appreciate all the SCE people for understanding my decision. After all, I was able to seek the world of music in a broader sense, and it turned out to be this current simple and non-detailed game. vibri was born in the circumstance like this.

Q. We've heard that vib-ribbon was developed with NTT – what made the engine so complex?

A. What we did with NTT was, to vocalize vibri's voice through NTT's Speech Synthesizer. This system is really great because it enables you to not only vocalize speech but also to sing songs. I consider creating an album of a vocalist who does not exist in reality to be one of my life's works, and vib-ribbon is like a starting point for this.

The game actually wasn't developed with the Speech Synthesizer, but in future, NanaOn-Sha will be utilizing this technology in games.

When a person speaks, the sound waves are transformed continuously. With NTT's system, each sound is picked up from the Database of tiny waves which, and connected in order to vocalize.

Therefore, the part that analyzes a sentence and puts the sounds together and the Database itself are all very complicated in structure. This system is a standard format in terms of sound synthesizing technology, but vib-ribbon successfully integrated this system into the game.

Q. You work very closely with John Belmonte, programmer for vib-ribbon, how did you meet?

A. Through the internet, I was introduced to him by a friend of mine who used to work for a computer manufacturer. John probably knew of me through the fact that NanaOn-Sha was the developer of Parappa the Rapper. After exchanging e-mails for a while, he called up one day and told me that he was near by my office, and our partnership started from then.

He's been in Japan for more than 3 years. There are about 10 people in the development team for vib-ribbon, and every member was irreplaceable in creating the concept and world of the game.

Q. How did you come up with the completely unique concept of playing a game along with your own CDs?

A. Wouldn't you agree that there is nothing more boring than seeing and sensing an object in the exact way every time you look at it? Many times, I think that new inventions are not simply new existences, but a result of a difference in perception. I came to realize this while creating music and wanted to express it through a game.

Q. Were there any particular music artists or tracks that you had in mind while creating vib-ribbon?

A. As I mentioned previously, one of my objectives was to avoid having any particular music tied too strongly to this game, so I purposely tried not to have any in mind while working on this project. One of the game designers was using a track from the Fat Boy Slim's album while working on the game, and since it fitted so well with the game, I think it had some effect on vib-ribbon's music.

Q. Who created the game's music in your team? What were their inspirations?

A. A band called Laugh and Beats together with a vocalist named Yoko Fujita.

It was truly arduous to produce their music, because what we were doing was creating music that fitted the world of vib-ribbon, without giving players the impression that a particular style of music is associated with the game, which is somewhat contradictory. For the first song and more simple levels of the game, I asked them to write a song that emphasizes the sychronization of the obstacles and the sound. And for the later levels, I asked them to add more variations to the sound of the music, to make the players want to play with their own CDs. You should ask the band directly what inspired them, but I personally think that the music turned out to be a good reflection of their impression of vibri. However, I had many detailed requests for the music and turned down their songs many times, so they might not want to work with me ever again!

Q. When you play vib-ribbon yourself, which music CDs do you choose? Is the style more Celine Dion or Aphex Twin?

A. Regardless of games, I'm personally into the mid-70's music right now. I did a 2-hour game play to this type of music auto demo play.

Q. If you had to develop a video game with a music artist, who would you chose? A DJ? A pop artist?

A. I don't have any specific artist in my mind. I haven't done it, but it would seem Jamiroquai's music would match the game's sound analysis system. Skunk Anansie would be good too.

By the way, Blur just released DVD, and the front cover seemed really similar to 'the world' of vibri. Check it out because it's quite funny. I should ask Blur to provide a song for our game.

Q. Do music and computer games go hand in hand? Do you feel more of a games developer or musician?

A. I believe that music and computer games go hand in hand, but the two, as industries do not, though I think this will change in time. I guess I would consider myself more as a musician, even though people may see me as a game creater especially through media.

Q. How important is it for you to keep designing revolutionary new games – do you feel that you provide inspiration for other developers and an incentive to be creative?

A. Nothing besides exciting inventions interests me, and I believe that this excitement can be shared among everyone. A lot of products nowadays only appeal to people locally, but a game is a medium that's relatively easily conveyed to people worldwide, and I hope it continues to be so. American developers can create better basketball

games than I can, just like European developers can create better football games. But at the same time. I want those developers to understand that those sports games do not appeal as much to Japanese gamers, and to make increasing efforts to succeed in the Japanese market.

Q. It is a few months before the launch of PlayStation 2 in Europe, can you explain why there is so much enthusiasm and hype about such a new and simple concept, as opposed to the profusion of games with high resolution graphics nowadays?

A. If that's true all the enthusiasm and hype, as you say, that's definitely flattering. Despite PlayStation 2's high technical performance, it cannot change a boring game into an exciting one. I believe the game fans in Europe are wise and aware of this and that's why they have found vib-ribbon attractive.

Furthermore, we were able to create vib-ribbon because of PlayStation 1, and for the PlayStation 2, we are planning to create games that are even more unique, so look forward to it.

Q. What's next for the legendary Masaya Matsuura?

A. In order to figure that out, I would like to visit Europe around the launch of vib-ribbon, and to check out how it's doing, only if I have the time, that is!

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Developer: SCEI / NanOn-Sha **Genre:** Rhythm **No. of Players:** 1
Peripherals: Analog Controller (DUALSHOCK), CDs